

# A French Horn Among The Philistines

By JEFFERSON NOEL

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ALL day long the wind had been blowing hard enough to raise freckles on an Indian. The alkali laden sand scurried over the desert, blinding us and our ponies and enveloping old landmarks in a cloud. Toward sundown it eased up a little, and when we had finished our dry tea only an occasional puff came to remind us of the day's discomfort.

When a lull came in the conversation I arose and sauntered beyond earshot of the camp. Juan, the Mexican, seemed to have been waiting for a break in the circle and started in the opposite direction. Glancing over my shoulder I saw Metcalf standing alone, throwing an armful of brush on the fire. Macpherson and Williams, being old cronies and a bit exclusive in their tattle when towns were far apart, had gone off, I thought, to finish the Randsburg bottle.

I was dimly conscious of something strange about the whole proceeding. On the desert men never wander away from camp, especially when a stranger is left on guard. This Metcalf—here anything that was dim and uncertain in my consciousness gave way to a clearly defined image—this Metcalf had been picked up at the Needles, and, in the prospectors' way, we asked no questions. None of us knew him. Suppose, I thought, he should put his heel on that dancing bit of flame? Suppose he should pack everything of value on the ponies and make a bee line for civilization?

I hesitated between two impulses. The camp needed me, but since early morning I had waited impatiently for this hour. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to sing.

Something other than the sense persuaded me the music breaking for utterance was of high order. Having only an indifferent memory for sweet sound, and, I must confess, a taste that might be termed popular, I was carried off my feet as much by the recognition of its merit as by its continual recurrence. But, strange as it might seem, despite the continual recurrence when I was surrounded by distractions, at the very moment I had an opportunity to do more than listen in dumb ecstasy, try as I might, I could not recall a single note. Laying the blame on my anxiety over the possible loss of our traps, I allowed the other impulse to get the upper hand and returned to camp.

Metcalf was lying on his back, smoking. There was no greeting. He did not even turn his head. About his indifference, which was extraordinary, I cared nothing, for just as I got within six feet of him the tantalizing air came again full blown into my brain.

I wondered, at my grasp of such a masterpiece. My conception was complete to the final note, and, though I had never taken a lesson in music, I knew—felt, rather—wherein it conformed to the highest standards of the art. I followed the dulcet tones that were ringing in my ear, and, finally obeying something stronger than my will, I threw back my head and, shaping my mouth as I had seen the fellows of the glee club at the university shape theirs, sang.

Metcalf's groaning brought me to a realization of the absurd figure I cut standing in the center of the camp beating time with a wisp of sage and singing to the moon as though my life depended on it. Hastily throwing some scrub on the fire, I set off with the determination of reaching the final cadence without interruption if I walked to the other side of the desert.

When beyond Metcalf's hearing I stopped and gathered myself together. The discovery of a talent is something to be well considered. Perhaps my ability as a composer would rank me above mediocrity. It would be impossible to conceive of one musical theme exhausting my originality; rather might it be expected to aid development in that direction.

Throwing back my head I formed my lips to sing, and not a note came forth. All my mental turnings and twistings were of no avail; not a suggestion of the melody that was to open up a noble career for me came to the foreground of consciousness. My castles were ruins.

The reaction caused by my failure brought a feeling akin to disgust. Waiting, dull and inert, not caring if the elusive air ever returned, my ear caught the faint echo of whistling off to the right. I went in the direction of it. As I drew near enough to distinguish between the sounds there seemed a strange familiarity in them. By stretching the imagination a resemblance to my own elusive air could be discovered.

Forgetting the indifference of a moment ago, I grew furious. Here was some scoundrel who had evidently heard me practicing near the fire trying to steal the product of my genius. Drawing near, I was about to tax him with his dishonesty when he stopped and, stretching his arms above his head, rose from the sand heap. His "bueno, senor," as he passed on his way to the camp told me it was Juan, the Mexican, the kindest and gentlest of men. Nothing but folly would appear in accusing him of anything but guilelessness.

Shaking in nervous jerks, my feet time to the unaccustomed mode of light, I turned away. Scarcely

had I gone 500 yards when I heard another whistle offend the night. And it was offense; it was little more than high treason against music. Williams had no doubt caught the first few bars of the strange air as I sang it near the fire and was determined to make them do duty for the whole composition.

Only Macpherson remained. There was no possibility of this man lurking in the shadows when I made that exhibition of myself before Metcalf. Filled with the traditional Scotch honesty, if he had heard me and was interested he would have come forward and asked me to teach him.

Keeping the flickering camp fire as a central point, I set out to encircle it. About one-third the distance was traversed when a low walling attracted my attention. At first I thought it the bark of a distant coyote, but closer investigation discovered a larger share of the human cry in it than could possibly come from that skulking evidence of arrested development. With my gun ready for action, I went on. I was firmly convinced some one was being murdered. It was Macpherson. He was singing—that is—

Now he was low and hoarse; again he was high and piercing. Between



SINGING TO THE MOON.

these two extremes were roars beside which the efforts of the bull of Bashan were as the beating of a lamb. And these sounds represented his conception of my beautiful air!

Here was a case of disillusionment without a parallel. About Williams I should say nothing. But Macpherson and Juan! I would have taken their simplest word and considered it binding as an oath. Two more honest men never trod the earth. Yet they were undoubtedly guilty of trying to appropriate a masterpiece that I had conceived.

I hastened back to where the wedge of flame pierced the pervading gloom—a gloom that now reeked up from every point and obscured even the beauty of the stars.

Juan and Metcalf and Williams were scattered lazily about the camp. It seemed impossible to do otherwise than shun my two old friends, so, wrapping myself in my blanket, I stretched out near the man we had picked up at the Needles, and my back had not fully touched the earth before the beautiful air came to me again. As its wonderful charm gripped me I grew dizzy with excitement. The velvety in my neck swelled at the memory of being robbed by the very men I had trusted most.

It was the gray of the morning when a coarse burlesque of my masterpiece intruded itself on my consciousness. Macpherson was sitting up beating time with a corner of his blanket to a kind of sotto voce reproduction of the absurd song he had made the night before. Metcalf was watching him, and Williams was turning uneasily in his sleep.

At a very palpable error I objected and called to Macpherson that he was wrong, but without paying the least attention he kept at his noise. Incensed, I took up the theme and sang it as I knew it should be sung. Then Williams at this juncture joined in with his stupid attempt to show acquaintance with the air. And finally Juan awoke and set the pace, musically speaking, for us all. The Mexican's notes were clear and well sustained and gave evidence of some training. Indeed, if we had been content to follow his leadership, it is barely possible we should have reproduced something like unison, or even harmony, but the strong personality that is engendered in men when they cease to be house animals was apparent in our efforts to sing—rather roar—each other down.

Metcalf groaned aloud. There was no humor in that early morning serenade. It contained all the tragedy of an artistic inspiration entering commonplace souls.

At breakfast we glared at each other. Williams toyed maliciously with his six shooter, and Macpherson, the peace loving Macpherson, unlimbered himself, placing both knife and gun within easy reach. The silence was ominous.

I was the first to speak. Addressing Juan, I asked him if the music did not run like this, whistling. Juan shook his head, but before he could suggest a correction Williams growled out his idea of how it should go.

The half quizzical smile on Macpherson's face gave way to a look of disgust. "This is how the tune goes, Williams," he broke in abruptly.

There was no question of the energy displayed in Macpherson's performance, but the grace left something to be desired.

I was on the verge of explaining this to him when Metcalf said, "That's the

most infernal piece of music I have ever heard, and, furthermore, you are all wrong."

To this day I fail to see what saved his life. It seemed as though a child of mine had been murdered before my eyes. Williams and Macpherson both covered him instantly.

"You mean you're a liar," said Williams hotly.

"Go on; say you're a liar," echoed Macpherson, nervously fingering the trigger.

"If you care to listen to me," answered Metcalf with an indifferent wave of his hand and a shrug that spoke volumes for his character, "I'll prove it the truth."

"Let's give him a chance," I broke in, impelled as much by the anxiety to discover what he meant as the desire to avoid blood.

Without another word Metcalf went to his saddlebag and drew forth a sort of flute, which he screwed together.

"This is where it tripped you by the heels," he said, nodding to Macpherson. He then gave an imitation of Macpherson's ridiculous squeaks. "This is how it goes." And he played like an angel. "That's the chorus. Now the woman comes on. She's a contralto." And again the superb sound that was a match for the morning filled our ears. A hint of the fullness of life came as he reached the cadence. My throat was full. I was tempted to speak, to cry aloud, when a tenor note rang out clear and strong, transporting us to a truer, better world. He played this part twice over and finished with a dying fall that was as sweet as sleep after nights of pain.

Perhaps it was a minute, perhaps it was an hour, before any one spoke. Time and space were eliminated from our consciousness. Juan, the Mexican, a glint of reverence in his eye, had edged close to the player. Macpherson sighed and turned away. Even Williams, the bullet head of the outfit, was visibly affected.

"Gentlemen," said Metcalf, calmly unscrewing the inspired instrument and stuffing it into his saddlebag, "that proves one-half of my contention; the other half can be as easily proved."

Macpherson plucked nervously at his tuft of a beard and in his blunt, honest fashion said, "I thought that was my own tune."

"I thought it was mine," remarked Williams, and there was in the sliding infection of the last word the suggestion of a man always sure of himself discovering a hole in his armor.

"I had dreams of developing into a great composer on the strength of it," I confessed, and, try as I might, I could not repress a sigh. Juan echoed the sigh and turned quietly away.

Metcalf seemed to be oblivious of his triumph. The indifference that was in his eyes when he looked down the muzzles of the revolvers still lingered. "You are all wrong," he finally began. "A man of whom you know nothing wrote it. There was a time when the music stood well in the world's opinion. About the beginning of this vogue I came in contact with it, to my grievous injury."

"Of course there was a woman," he went on after a slight pause. "There always is. But she was such a woman as only poets know in their dreams. And by every right that springs from years of unflinching devotion and unselfish love she was mine."

"Then he came, the composer, with all his old world charm and his old world knowledge of the human heart. In something less than a month from the day I introduced him to her I learned that my unflinching devotion and unselfish love could not tip the beam against the smile of his smiles. This knowledge came to me individually and collectively."

own. As they sang I watched them—But why go on? The music was composed for her. The man's soul was in it."

"That was ten years ago. Occasionally the desire takes possession of me to learn if she still lives, if she is happy—with him, and I move in the track of men. Yesterday she seemed to draw me down that way." And he waved his hand toward the crowded east. We were hardly conscious that he had finished. His voice had fallen to a whisper.

Over us the sky hung fiery red. The desert wore a strange, pathetic look. The



HE PLAYED AS MAN NEVER PLAYED BEFORE.

blue veil shutting in the mountains away, suddenly moved. Not a twig or grain of sand moved. The wind was dead.

Metcalf quietly saddled his pony. We watched him with the sympathy we felt showing in our faces.

"Won't you play for us just a little?" said Macpherson hesitatingly.

For answer Metcalf drew forth the flute and, leaning against the pony, played as man never played before. He seemed to be something more than human and carried us with him into a world far beyond this.

Where he led us we were content to go. It was up, ever up, and the higher place was easy of attainment when he pointed the way. None of the cramping misery of the cities was in the life unfolded for us. The kisses of the kindly rain, the caresses of the splendid sun, the freedom of God's own smile were of it. The generous breath of the morning lulled us to sleep again, and the whisperings of the water brook came to our ears.

He was a mere speck against the sky line when Williams said, "Beautiful! Beautiful! Play it just once more."

Juan pressed my hand and was gone. Macpherson looked with vacant eyes after the Mexican, then arose and saddled up. He waved goodbye to us as he went away.

Williams moved, and I put my hand on his arm. "They will not find him," I whispered hoarsely. "He will get behind the mist and be lost." Perhaps they will search for him forever.

"Perhaps," said the bullet head, "but for that music I would search for him in hades." And he, too, rode off, leaving me alone on the desert, regretting the lot of reason that bade me stay.

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